

INTERVIEW

Broadway (2022)

Interview with director Christos Massalas

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I first watched *Broadway* at the Cyprus Film Days festival in April 2022 in a theatre packed with filmgoers who devoured every image Massalas had to offer to them and who stayed on to hear him talk about his film after the screening. I was blown away by the film, not because it was some groundbreaking cinematic experience, but, because it felt curiously close to home, yet in a rather heartwarming manner—for *Broadway* speaks directly to the queer experience of my generation, especially to those of us who grew up watching classical Hollywood and the golden age of Greek cinema, adoring their quasi-mythological divas. It offers a post-queer parade of freaks and divas, of film noir characters and plotlines, camp spectacle, queer iconography, saturated colour, and lavish orchestral music. Above all, a new-found gem of contemporary Greek cinema, bridging diverse generations and traditions from film history, and offering back to cinephiles and mainstream audiences alike those lost pleasures that only the big screen can offer.

I asked Christos Massalas if he wanted to do an interview, an offer which he gladly accepted. His answers to my questions wonderfully complement the filmic experience without deconstructing it, without disappointing our expectations or diluting our affective responses. On the contrary, in his deeply philosophical, informed, unapologetic, heartfelt, honest, yet almost annoyingly humble responses, Massalas, much like his film itself, offers insights, visions and ideas from an artful universe full of hope and beauty.

MP: *Broadway* is both an actual marginalized place and a queer aesthetic space. In realist terms, it is an abandoned cinema-theatre, squatted by pickpockets, fugitives and queer people, both a refuge and a hide-out. At the same time, one cannot help but notice the huge posters of Zoe Laskari, the larger than life sets and decors, and the flamboyant wardrobe, which, when taken together, construct a pretty campy backdrop for the story but one that also highlights the post-modern aspects of your film: the excessive self-reflexivity and the nostalgic feel of an older,

lost era of cinema-going, perhaps the one we call in Greece “the golden age of Greek cinema”. So, is it a real place, or a fictional space which might or might not have existed? Does the queer community find refuge in such places?

CM: First of all, Broadway is a real place. I mean the building that you see in the film is a real entertainment complex called Broadway, which was created in the late 1960s-early 1970s and has been abandoned since the early 2000s. But it’s not quite like what you see in the film—there’s nothing left of its past glory there. We reinvented the place and re-designed it. The theatre that you see in the film doesn’t exist. We took the old cinema and turned it into a theatre. The cinema’s old foyer became the dressing room. We filled the place with old props, costumes, billboards and wallpaper—such as the one featuring Zoe Laskari. So, we created a heightened version of a real place, we fictionalized it, we mythologized it. This Broadway has acquired a reverse-psychogeographic function—as if it were the canvas on which the characters project their dreams and fantasies. But it could also be a manifestation of a decaying Greek dream, or American dream—or is it a nightmare? It is a refuge, but it can also turn into a prison. When there’s a gate with a lock and only one person holds the key, then a refuge can turn into prison.

MP: *Speaking about post-modernism, the film alludes to the cinema of Pedro Almodovar, of Panos H. Koutras, but also to New Queer Cinema, at the level of aesthetics, genre and style. Was that something consciously pursued, or did it just happen? Or, put otherwise, what have your influences been in the making of this film and generally?*

CM: When you’re a first-time director, people try to find precursors, directors whose work seems to have certain similarities with your own, so that your film can be put into a certain tradition or a “canon”. I’ve seen it happen to others, it’s now happening with me. I understand how this whole thing works. But that doesn’t mean that these are necessarily my influences. There may be intertextualities, but not necessarily references. Almodovar is certainly a director whose films I have watched extensively and have been influenced by. And of course, he is the gold standard for any film dealing with queer themes and aesthetics. You cannot avoid the comparison. But it’s not that I was consciously referencing Almodovar’s films in *Broadway*. Whatever the influence he had on me, it has been digested and processed. The same thing goes with Fassbinder and Gregg Araki and so many others. A few Greek critics have mentioned Panos H. Koutras as a possible reference point, but I don’t really see the connection to be honest. Again, I think it’s a matter of intertextuality. Panos Koutras has been one of the very few Greek directors dealing with queer themes in the last few decades, so that automatically makes him a reference point for certain Greek critics or academics, regardless of the fundamental differences in our filmic approaches. But if you look closely at the filmic texts, the visual language, and the

form—and not just focus on the general idea of “queerness”—then you will probably see the fundamental differences. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not that I don’t appreciate his work, because I do. But it’s just that I wasn’t making any such references. The films that I was more consciously influenced by for *Broadway* were certain film noirs of the 1940s and erotic thrillers of the 1980s, like *Body Heat*, for example. And Hitchcock, whose films have had the greatest impact on me, from a very young age. But Hitchcock’s influence is ubiquitous—I can’t even claim him as my “own” reference. It’s like if a musician says that they’ve been influenced by Bach. It doesn’t say much about their individual case really.

MP: *How about the audience’s response? How have you experienced the film’s journey across festivals and cinema-theatres nationally and internationally? How have different audiences received the film?*

CM: It’s really interesting to see how the film plays out differently in different contexts. Firstly, with regards to festivals, the film has had a pretty successful run, starting with Rotterdam, where it had its world premiere. And it keeps going. It’s not that all festivals have welcomed the film with open arms, because some haven’t. Some programmers have had trouble digesting the film. Perhaps, because it doesn’t exactly remind them of recent Greek films of the post-Lanthimos era; or it’s not a social-realist film that can be evaluated in the context of such realism; and it’s not even an experimental film. It’s a hybrid-genre film, which is loud and proud, which speaks Greek, wears Swarovski, has a big orchestral score *à la* Old Hollywood—and is made by a first-time director. So, OK, perhaps it’s too much to process, for some. But, generally, the responses have been rather warm. And the film has already been distributed theatrically in several countries, so it has had the chance to screen for regular audiences, not just festival cinephiles. And, these regular cinema-goers especially have received the film with great warmth, because they don’t have specific preoccupations when they enter the movie theatre. They just want to watch a film and be entertained and they’re open to a new experience, as long as the story is engaging. The messages of enthusiasm that I’ve received in the past months have made all the years of agonizing over the development of the film more than worthwhile. Soon, it will come out in US theatres and I’m really curious to see how *Broadway* will play on Broadway.

MP: *Would you tell us more about the development stage of your project: from Sundance to Cannes, to the pitching sessions, the script labs, etc.? How valuable have they been in helping you bring out your vision? How much has this process altered the original idea or script and what else do you think these networks add to the process of filmmaking and cinema, in general?*

CM: In the beginning, I was very sceptical about script labs and co-production pitching sessions and so forth. I really wanted to avoid all this, if I could. Then I made *Copa-Loca*, a self-produced short, which was selected for Cannes, and suddenly all these people started approaching me and inviting me to take part in their programmes. The people from Sundance, for example, called me out of the blue and asked if I had a feature script that they could consider for their Screenwriters Lab. I never applied, they just found me after watching *Copa-Loca*. And even then, I tried to find excuses to avoid the whole thing, but they were adamant that I send them something: “You have three days to send us your script!”, they said. And anyway, it was flattering that they were that interested in my work, so I sat down and tried to polish a very rough draft I had in those 3 days and I finally sent it to them. A week later they informed me that I got accepted for the Lab and soon after I travelled to Utah. And it was really a wonderful experience. But, that’s because Sundance Lab is not an ordinary script workshop—it’s not a workshop, basically. It’s an eclectic gathering of writers, where you sit down and discuss and reflect on your script and the story you want to tell. And I met some great people there, who helped me unlock certain aspects of the story and improve the script. I wouldn’t say that the story of *Broadway* changed there, but I think that certain aspects became clearer, in my mind and on paper, after these conversations. Apart from Sundance, I didn’t do any other script labs or workshops, but I did participate in L’Atelier in Cannes, which is a co-production forum. And that’s where we met Le Pacte, the French sales agent and distributor, which pre-bought the film and invested in it, straight after reading the script in Cannes. Without their investment we couldn’t have finished the film. So yes, these networks do help, but I think you have to be careful to not overdo it and lose your clarity in the process.

MP: *How is it to make films, and especially queer films, in Greece in the early 2020s? What opportunities and options are available in terms of production and distribution for queer cinema? Are transnational funding/production modes the only way to achieve such projects?*

CM: Let me just say that when I make a film, I don’t think that I’m making a “queer” film, even though my themes are queer, stemming from my sensibility. Of course, I don’t object if somebody calls my films “queer”, because I understand that this is a characterization, which allows us to have a conversation about the whole thing. In the same vein, I don’t think that I’m making a “Greek” film, even though my films are Greek, in one way or another. So, when I’m in the process of creation, I try to leave the sociological dictionary outside the door. When I have to defend a film for funding, which is a process that has nothing to do with the essence of the artistic practice, then I have to accept the usage of these terms, because funding bodies and institutions need to find a way to classify things. Fortunately, I have had no actual problems so far—that I know of—with funding

because of the nature of my films. *Broadway* was a co-production but that was because the film funds in Greece are limited, not because I was telling a story with a queer sensibility. And let me tell you that we got all the funds we applied for in Greece, but we were rejected twice by a big fund in France because they “didn’t believe in the script”. I’m not saying that this was related to the script’s queer aspect, but it’s just that you never know which people will connect or not with the story you’re trying to tell. It’s all quite vague.

MP: *If anything, Broadway is a film that foregrounds characters who resist a fixed sexual and gender identity, who constantly defy norms and cross boundaries. How do you think the film responds to the current debates about gender identity, trans rights and representation in Europe and North America? Did you feel pressured at any stage making this film and presenting it at film festivals? Did you care about issues of political correctness and sensitivity?*

CM: First of all, let me say that I consider my films “personal”. It’s a bit difficult to articulate definitively what “personal” means. It doesn’t mean that they are autobiographical per se. But let’s say that I don’t embark on the journey of a film by “choosing” a subject matter. I make films from the “matter” of my experiences—whether these experiences are physical-literal or mental. And this “matter” becomes the material from which I mould fictional characters, stories and concepts. I try to be as specific as I can in this process, because I believe that through specificity you can get closer to something authentic. So I rarely think about “subject matter”; I always concentrate on creating a world that is as specific as possible and that feels true to me. If my films are “queer” or deal with “queer themes” or “gender politics” it is because this is my own “matter”, these are my own questions. It’s not a choice, it’s my natural inclination. So, I don’t consider political correctness. The “political” dimension of my films comes from a personal, intimate place. If we say that all films are “political statements” then my statements are shaped through the experience of having grown up in a suffocatingly normative society, where authenticity was—and still is, in many cases—institutionally suppressed. If I can contribute something to the current debates about gender identity and trans rights, it is by creating these hybrid worlds and these characters, who cross boundaries or, at least, try to.

MP: *The Athenian queer community is also featured in the film. How have you approached them and how has this collaboration come up? Did you have fun making this film?*

CM: Making a fun film can be very difficult! I wanted this film to be fun, and I take fun very seriously—it’s an oxymoron, I know. But the more colourful, the more “larger-than-life” the world you’re creating, the more you need to design it and fine-tune it. It takes a lot of work. So on the one hand, I had a blast seeing this world come to life, but on the other, my collaborators and I had to operate at the

top of our game to make it happen. Now, with regards to the Athenian queer community and more specifically the drag community, I am deeply grateful for their support and for their acceptance to be part of the film. I owe this as well to Konstantinos Menelaou (the creator of the Queer Archive¹) who brought all these wonderful drag queens to the film. When I wrote the scene in which the Athenian Drag Queens make their grand entrance (and save the day), I knew that I wanted to have the real Grand Dames themselves and not find actors and dress them up. Again, this is a “political” choice, but it was the natural choice for me. I wanted to turn a spotlight on the beautiful existing Drag community of my city. For the role of Barbara, on the other hand, I wanted to explore things from the opposite side. Barbara is a very particular, specific case: Barbara begins as Jonas, a cis male, who puts on a feminine disguise out of necessity, in order to hide from those who want to harm him. And in the process of playing the role of Barbara, Jonas starts discovering an inner femininity or rather a fluidity—which we all have, but so many cis men suppress (and oppress). Gradually, Barbara comes to life as an individual, who cannot be labelled in binary or stereotypical terms. Barbara is perhaps the “+” in LGBTQI+.

MP: *Would you say Barbara is a double for Athens itself? As a city in constant transition and transformation, a city that is both adored and chased? Is your film a love letter to a queer city which verges between the glorious and the marginalized?*

CM: Perhaps. That’s an interesting observation. Barbara is a “vessel” for so many different ideas about transition, and a mirror for the city but also for Greek culture. Even the notion of “Greekness” is becoming more and more ambiguous. We live in a (post)globalized world—that’s not a good or a bad thing, it’s just where we’re at right now. And Athens is such an imperfect city, with all its architectural inconsistencies, with all its beauty and dirt, that it becomes the perfect stage for this play of transformation. Athens is a constant work-in-progress, much like Barbara, much like me and you and them and everybody who dares to defend their right to be a work-in-progress.

MP: *Broadway is a film that, indeed, puts forward this “work-in-progress” concept, these concepts of transition and transformation, particularly through its focus on the constantly moving body. It is a film brimming with musical numbers and glamorized, stylized movement in space, including acts of dance and violence. Is this a dialogue with—or critique of—the various discourses/norms that seek to regulate or contain the body?*

CM: The body is at once our physical limit, our pleasure dome and our canvas for transformation—transformation in small, day to day, measures but also bigger

¹<https://www.thequeerarchive.com/copy-of-homepage-1>.

changes like sex reassignment. At the same time, the image of our body “belongs” to somebody else’s immediate consciousness, not our own. My image exists in your perception of the physical world. My visual experience of the physical world excludes me—or at least the wholeness of my image in space. So when I transform, I essentially transform *your* perception of the world not my own. And by changing your perception of the world, I break certain barriers—spatial and mental—which allows me to alter my course in the space-time continuum. Dance, on the other hand, is a way of sculpting new spaces through motion, while the dancers physically “reshape” themselves in an instant. And when I say dance, I don’t only mean the traditional definition of it. Pickpockets choreograph themselves in order to steal a wallet. Similarly, an act of physical violence can be seen as an act of dance, a way of redefining space. All these ideas were running through my head when I was creating *Broadway*. It’s difficult to sum them up in a just few sentences. But it’s all there, yes.